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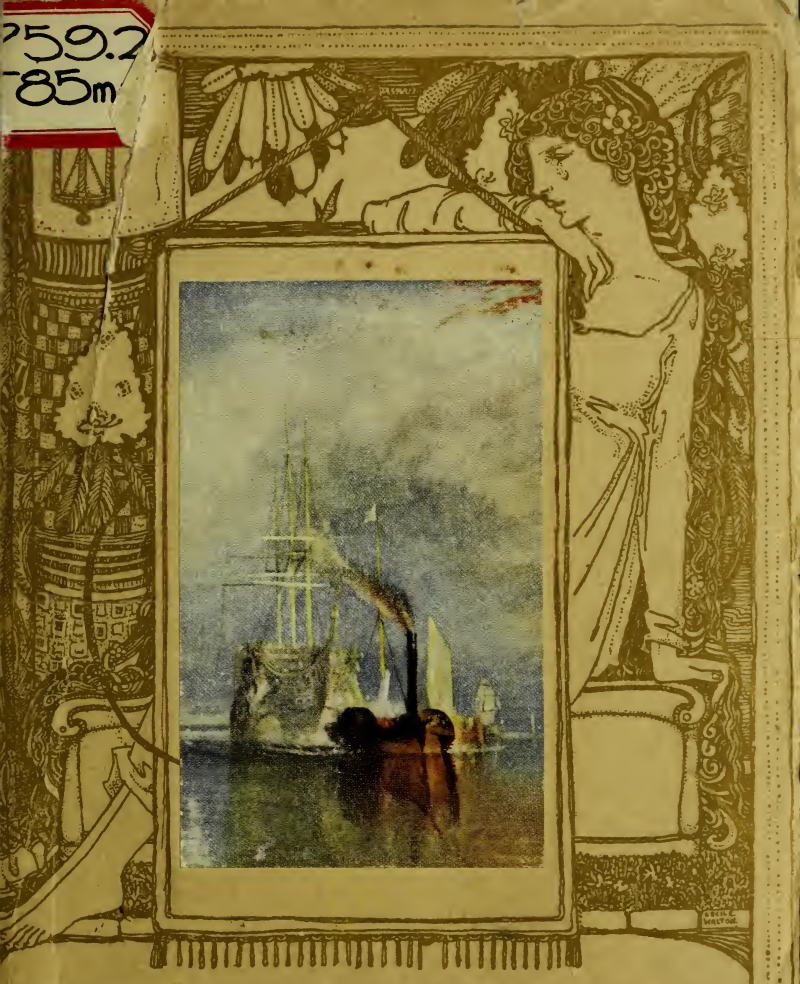

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The Charm of Turner

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The Fighting Téméraire

(Oil painting. National Gallery)

This is indeed one of the triumphs of an artist whose successes are without number. Not only does he give us a piece of symbolism blent with realism but he has painted a sunset of intoxicating splendour. Here is not only a painter's vision but a poet's dream, something that holds the imagination and stirs the senses as only the finest art can hope to do. The picture exhibited in 1839 was, like so many more of Turner's, only finished as it hung on the walls of the Academy.

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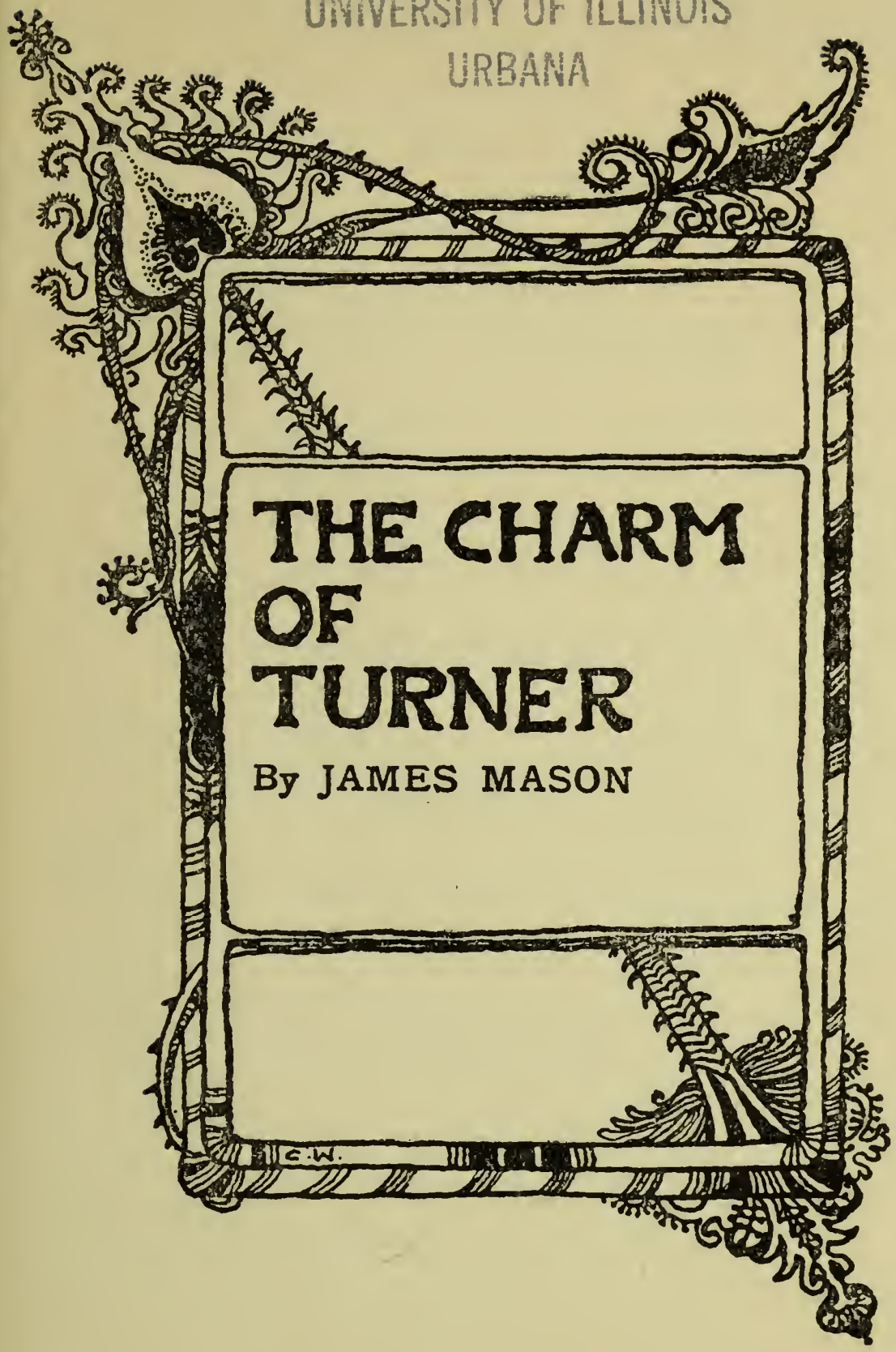

THE CHARM OF TURNER

By JAMES MASON

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The Charm of Turner

I. HIS ART

THE human eye has remarkable limitations, *His Art.*
and only those who have trained their sight by dint of hard and painful labour can realise how little we truly see of the objects glanced at in careless fashion. Many of us see what we know we are looking at without pausing to consider the subtle changes brought about by the distance and the point of view. The people who see truly and widely are those of whom it may be said, as it was said of certain inspired men in the biblical narrative, that "their eyes were opened." The most of us go through our lives with our eyes half closed, and so rooted is the habit of judging in the light of an

His Art.

incomplete vision that, when a clear-sighted man or woman comes along, our greeting is merely anger or indignation. It is hard for us to understand how the evidence of our untrained eye can be less credible than the evidence of the trained eye of somebody else. Human intolerance is not, of course, limited to matters of sight in a literal sense. There are other gifts of vision enjoyed by the few to the great disgust, or active indignation, of the many, but it is with the human eye, "the dilated eye," as Sir Joshua called it, that we are concerned here, and other aspects of the question are of less moment in this place.

In the history of art we find a long unending revolt against those whose vision is more acute than that of their generation. The clear-sighted artists labour to justify their own vision. They become the by-word and the scorn of their contemporaries, and the idols

of the generations to come. When a man of genius arises, his position is more painful than that of any other, because he sees with the inward as well as the outward eye, and travels far beyond his years. *His Art.*

We know nothing about genius, save that it is closely akin to insanity, and that it chooses the strangest subjects through which to manifest itself. Whatever the law that rules genius, we have not the faintest clue to it. A Shakespeare, Keats, Mozart, Velasquez appears, we hail or we neglect their gifts during their lifetime, and put up monuments that do but commemorate, in most cases, the blindness or deafness of our forbears. This country has produced many men of genius, but few in whom the outward and visible signs were more closely allied to madness than they were in the case of Joseph Mallord William Turner: the greatest master of light and distance; the

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finest painter of landscape in the annals of British art; the man who was despised and rejected by many of his contemporaries because he was more responsive to light than to form.

In his case genius chose a very lowly home. Turner was the son of a barber living in Maiden Lane. He came into the world on the anniversary of Shakespeare's birth and death, in the year 1775. His father was a good-hearted commonplace and penurious man of no education, and his mother passed many years of her life in a madhouse. The son grew up and became one of those people whom few can see in the same light. Take the less attractive aspects of Turner, and you find a close-fisted, mean, irascible man who, when he could spare time from labour that seemed to have no end, was always ready to devote it to a quarrel. A man who drank more than was good for him, who never

Norham Castle

(*Oil painting. Tate Gallery*)

This is a vision of dawn, full of the most wonderful lines, the triumph of a palette that was concerned chiefly with rainbow colouring. It has only come into notice of recent years, having spent a long time in the cellars of the National Gallery before it was cleaned and sent to Millbank. The first painting of Norham Castle that Turner made established his reputation, and he returned to the subject many times.

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married, but formed irregular relations with different women, and lived and died with them in places where he hoped his associates could not trace him. Here is the ugly side of the picture, but it is not more true than the side that reveals to us a totally different man. There is a Turner who was devoted to his uncouth old father, who took him from the Covent Garden slum to the fine home in Harley Street, and afterwards to the country, who never turned his back upon a friend, whose generosity to those he loved, and in certain recorded cases, to complete strangers, was positively lavish. The man who drove such hard bargains and never failed, or never appeared to fail, in the exaction of his pound of flesh, refused an offer of £5000 from the National Gallery for one of his pictures because he intended to present it to the nation. He hoarded up everything he could save, living shabbily and meanly through

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years of considerable affluence, but, by his will, his huge fortune should have passed to a fund for the benefit of poor artists, and only his extreme illiteracy surrendered his intentions to a Court of Chancery that the lawyers might gather up a great part of his hard-earned wealth. Ruskin's wonderful "Modern Painters" is a vindication of Turner's art. The love of his friends, of Ruskin himself, of Mr Fawkes of Farnley, of Chantrey, Lord Egremont, and the Rev. Mr Trimmers is a sufficient vindication of his character, if such a thing be called for, though in point of fact we are not concerned with what the man was. With his own generation all the significance of this aspect of Turner passed away. We are concerned with what he did, but because his very human weaknesses, his uncouthness, and his unconventionality have been treated as an offence, it is pleasant to recall Ruskin's verdict, that

"Turner had a heart as intensely kind, and as nobly true as ever God gave to one of His creatures." It is pleasant too that we should have the evidence of his contemporaries to show that Turner never spoke ill of man or woman. He was, in short, as many-sided and as imperfect as the best of us would be content to be. When all is said he stands out as the most remarkable man of his generation; one who worked without cease all the days of his life, and moved steadily through the realms in which his contemporaries could follow him to a world of his own creation; the realm of sunlight colouring into which he was the first to venture. Since his day others have followed. The French impressionists, Monet, Pissarro, Sisley, and the rest have painted with the colours of the rainbow, and filled their canvases with lambent sunlight and infinite distances. But Turner was the pioneer. It was he who

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established the theories set out in the Cafe Guerbois by men who had yet to see his work. He came to his kingdom late in life. It was in the last ten years that he sought above all other things to paint the sunlight, and his last words as he looked to the West from the room in which he died were "The sun is God."

English art has found no successor to Turner, but this is not a matter of surprise, for genius is a very rare gift. Only a genius may hope to claim comparison with the man who painted the Italian water colours and "The Fighting Téméraire," "Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus" and "The Bay of Baiæ." The genius when he arrives must have an iron constitution, and the capacity for taking infinite pains. All these were among the gifts of Turner, who started to draw when he was a little boy, and in the days of his manhood tramped all over

England carrying his luggage, such as it was, in a handkerchief tied on to the end of a stick. It was nothing for him to trudge twenty miles, taking invaluable notes all the time, to sleep where he might, eat what he could, and care for nothing under the heavens save his work, which was the expression of the beauty he saw around him. In England alone this ungainly, unattractive, but inspired little man has put upon the record of his achievements studies of fourteen cathedrals, twenty-seven abbeys, and sixty-six castles. His work in Scotland as an illustrator of the Waverley Novels is not to be overlooked, while no small part of his fame rests upon the pictures that were the fruits of his Continental journeys, the long sojourns in France, Italy and Switzerland. The genius of Turner is very largely a matter of self-development. So closely can it be followed that some of those who

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have given the closest study to his life and art divide the latter into three periods. The first began when he was twenty-five years old, and lasted for twenty years, the second, or middle period, occupied the next fifteen, the third terminating in 1845, after which hand and eye seemed to lose their cunning, though it well may be that the visions were too subtle and too magnificent in their splendour for the weakening hand to record. To the end he was faithful. "I paint what I see," he said, "not what I know is there," and we find him towards the close of his life, and in the years when strength may well have been failing, going out in a stormy sea, and being lashed to a mast in order that he might study for himself the action and appearance of the waves in a storm. We read, too, of his visit to Mr Mayall, the photographer, in the days when photography was in its infancy and certain

problems of light were being studied for the first time, in order to inquire about the latest theories. He did not use his own name. Perhaps it was a weakness of his to conceal his identity when there was little or no occasion to do so and it was quite by accident that the photographer found out who his visitor really was. *His Art.*

Turner took all art to be his province, but perhaps his greatest success was achieved in water-colour. As a colourist he owed much in the early days to the old masters, and as he grew up his one ambition in life would seem to have been to do better than Claude Lorraine, Poussin and Vandervelde, and to excel his contemporaries like Loutherbourg. He did not express his ambitions in words, but in deeds, as when he left his "Sun Rising in a Mist," and his "Dido building Cathage" to the national Gallery on condition that they should hang between two of Claude Lorraine's pictures,

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"The Seaport" and "The Mill." It must surely have been the desire to emulate Claude's "Liber Veritatis" that led him to produce his "Liber Studiorum." Although some of his biographers emphasise the story that he was worried into doing this, it is quite impossible to think of Turner yielding to any requests that did not fit in with his own desires and ambitions. He was not built of the stuff that makes concessions under any conditions. In fact the complete inability to bow to the wishes of others was the cause of the innumerable quarrels that soured a part of his life. He did not care for quarrelling. He was, in fact, extremely sensitive, but no sacrifice was too great where a principle of his art was involved.

Somewhere in his "Breakfast Table" series Oliver Wendell Holmes tells us of the three Johns, of whom the real John is known only to his Maker. There are not

three Turners, but a dozen. He has been derided for faults and praised for merits which he did not possess. Many men have tried to interpret his art to his contemporaries, and his life to succeeding generations, but the real Turner in whom genius and madness were so closely akin, that there were times when his actions might have been the outcome of either, eludes us all. It must suffice us that he too was known to his Maker. His work is our only proper concern. We have the evidence of eyes which are trained to see, if not nearly so far as the painter's vision extended, yet considerably farther than that of his contemporaries, and with this better vision comes a larger appreciation of the work done, and a deeper sense of gratitude to the man who has passed so far beyond the little tribute of our praise.

His Art.

II. HIS LIFE

His Life. The date and place of Turner's birth have been already noted, and this brief review of his life may start with school days at Brentford, where he was sent to stay with one of his father's relatives, presumably because his health was not robust. Even there he appears to have started his life work, by colouring engravings, partly as a commission from a tradesman who had noted his capacity and partly for his own benefit. His father's shop served as a gallery for their exhibition and sale. We learn, too, that he made copies of some of the water colours of Paul Sandby, R.A., one of the Royal Academy's original members, and at the age of thirteen he was sent to Margate, probably by packet from the Thames, and he spent a year at a school

there. He does not appear to have learnt very much either at Brentford or Margate. To the end of his life, his only medium for expression was the pencil or the brush. His ill-spelt and worse constructed letters were the despair of all who received them, so we may presume that the schoolmasters laboured in vain. But if they could not teach him he could at least teach himself, and Margate gave him the first intimate acquaintance with the sea of whose many moods he was ultimately to become the master. Perhaps the exigencies of the barber's trade did not make long-sustained education practicable, for at the age of fourteen we find the lad working for an engraver and perspective draughtsman who had no good opinion of his pupil's capacities, and returned him to his father with the suggestion that he should find some other occupation for him. Yet, oddly enough, Turner did not waste his time or his

His Life

His Life.

opportunities there, and used to say in later years "Tom Molton of Long Acre was my real master."

The boy had a great friend in those days, Tom Girtin by name. They were devoted to one another, and Girtin's future as an artist was hardly less brilliant than Turner's, but he suffered from consumption, then, as now, the greatest scourge of these islands, and died at an early age. "If Tom Girtin had lived I must have starved," said Turner, who was always ready to declare that his friend's work was better than his own.

The two boys were fortunate in finding friends. In the Adelphi Terrace lived Mr Henderson and Dr Munro, connoisseurs both. They were generous men who opened their houses to young artists short of cash, gave them some congenial work, a trifling sum, and their supper. For keen lads there could be no more pleasurable evening than

one that brought them into touch with fine work, sound advice, and genuine hospitality. The friendships thus formed were equally beneficial to all parties, and in the case of Dr Munro and Turner, the intimacy was very long lasting. Mr Hardwicke, R.A., one of the visitors to Adelphi Terrace, and a clever architect, was sufficiently impressed by Turner's promise to persuade his father to enter him as a student at the Royal Academy, a training which Ruskin, by the way, regarded as unnecessary, and indeed useless. But it may be suggested with due deference to the author of "Modern Painters" that, even though the training was of little worth, the association with the Academy was distinctly useful. It brought Turner into the company of the leading men of his day, and he was enabled to become an exhibitor in 1790, when at the early age of fifteen a water-colour of his found a place in

His Life.

His Life.

the annual show. We learn that he worked for a while in the studio of Sir Joshua Reynolds, but though that brief connection may have helped to waken the colour sense, it could have done nothing else, for at no time of his life was Turner a portrait painter.

He was still living with his father in Maiden Lane during these student days, and the two would seem to have been quite happy in each other's company. When the time came for the lad to start earning his own living, he set up a studio in Hand Court, Maiden Lane, and gave lessons in drawing too. From the very first Turner was a splendid draughtsman; long before he became a colourist his drawings were distinguished, and at this point, in his early and most impressionable days, brief reference may be made to the unfortunate love affair that seems to have turned awry the current of his life. The girl who would have been his wife lost

A Ship Aground

(Oil painting. Tate Gallery)

Here we have a work of the painter's middle period, a ship aground in a heavy swell, a fiery sunset, and a hint of so much feeling for sea and sky that is expressed for us only when we have studied the canvas again and again. Everything is so clearly seen, felt, and presented that this canvas shares the common gift of Turner's pictures, a sense of inspiration.

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her mother, and a stepmother of the traditional type intercepted his letters, so that the girl thought he had forgotten or ceased to care for her. She waited for a long time, and then accepted the hand of another suitor. Just before the marriage Turner found out the truth, but it was too late. The newcomer was accepted in his place, and we may not know with what emotions he discovered the marriage was a complete and melancholy failure. That this incident had a very great bearing upon the painter's life and his attitude to women is undeniable. But it did not provide him with his one great passion, for in later years when he had taken a house in the country at Twickenham and made the acquaintance of the Rev. H. S. Trimmer, Vicar of Heston, he fell in love with the gentleman's daughter, and wrote to her father what is probably one of the most extraordinary letters of its kind on record.

His Life.

His Life.

"I am not to see Sandcombe[1] until November. Sandcombe sounds just now in my ears like an act of folly, when I reflect how little I have been able to be there this year, and less chance perhaps for the next, in looking forward to a Continental excursion, and poor Daddy seems as much plagued with weeds as I am with disappointments, but if Miss —— would but waive bashfulness—or, in other words, make an offer instead of expecting one—the same might change occupiers."

This extraordinary effusion, which is in reality a very fair sample of the painter's letter writing, may be taken to mean that the lady was to propose to him, and that if she would do so he would accept her, but he seems to have reckoned without due allowance for the

[1] Sandcombe was Turner's country house at Twickenham, one of the two houses in the locality which he occupied between 1814 and 1826.

maiden modesty which was so much to the fore in the early part of the nineteenth century among girls who had been well brought up. Presuming that the letter did invite Miss Trimmer to ask the painter to marry her, the fact remains that it failed conspicuously to achieve the desired result. *His Life.*

Turning back to the narrative, broken in its continuity by this reference to the year 1815, a word may be said of the extraordinary poem begun by Turner shortly after his first disappointment in love, and apparently continued at irregular intervals through many years. He called it "The Fallacies of Hope," and when he had painted a picture he would quote a few lines from this work which never passed out of the manuscript stage in order to explain the mood or story which the canvas illustrated. That Turner had poetic gifts of the highest order is undeniable, but they were expressed

His Life.

through the proper medium of an artist. His pen was powerless to utter anything save sentences hopelessly long, badly involved, and well-nigh meaningless. One does not know if the complete manuscript of "The Fallacies of Hope" be extant, but it would appear certain that most of Turner's biographers are content to quote it very sparingly, and even the selected quotations justify their reticence.

In the intervals of teaching and painting pictures for the few whose discerning eyes could see the coming of the master, Turner tramped the country in fashion already described, and on one of his journeys in the late nineties he passed Norham Castle, and made a drawing or a painting of the place, of which he himself said in later years, "It took; and from that day to this I have had as much as my hands could execute." The picture of the Castle reproduced here is from the oil paint-

ing. It was taken from the cellars of the National Gallery five or six years ago and hung in the Turner room in the Tate Gallery at Millbank. *His Life.*

In the year 1799 the painter had made so much progress that the Academy placed him upon the list of its associates, though it may be remarked that the three divisions of his art life set out by Ruskin range in all from 1800 to 1845. At the time when the Academy elected to honour him, Turner had not found himself in the eyes of one of his greatest critics. Ruskin's criticisms may have had its limitations, naturally he could only judge as far as his sight would allow him, and Turner's work beat him again and again, but the debt the artist owes to the critic is in this case at least a very real one. In 1799 Turner was already well off. He could leave Maiden Lane and Hand Court behind him, and take a house in Harley Street where he lived

His Life.

in fashion which responded not at all to the amenities of Cavendish Square. His father, who soon came to join him, would stretch his canvases, clean his brushes, help to cook the simple meal, and the house was seldom in a state that invited inspection. In his life, as in his art, the painter made no concessions. The Academy might honour him if it liked, but it is at least doubtful whether he would have been greatly concerned had it thought fit not to do so. He might have regretted the neglect in as much as it would have damaged his market, but he did nothing at all to curry favour with the powers that were. He went out very little and entertained not at all. His companions were for the most part recruited from the lower orders. He loved simplicity and had few social instincts. Moreover, there was small opportunity for relaxation. His work was for all day and every day.

One of his important commissions following the gift of the A.R.A. was the illustration of Dr Whitaker's "Richmondshire." The doctor was writing a history of his division of Yorkshire, which is perhaps as famous for its beauty now as it was then, and Turner knew the country. In 1802 he received full honours of the Academy, and undertook his first Continental journey, visiting Calais, where he painted a famous picture of the harbour, Maçon, Bonneville, Chamouni, and the Mer de Glace. For the effect of the Alps upon his mind and his art one may turn with confidence to Ruskin, who, with his own enthusiasm for the Alps, was able to appreciate more than any of his contemporaries could hope to do the full effect of their beauty upon the painter's mind and brush. Turner was a man whose impressions worked slowly. He did not reproduce scenery that affected him until it had entered deeply into his life, and

His Life.

consequently he had to wait for some years to find the true effect of the first experience of foreign travel. Indeed, it may be said that the lesson of the Alps was not seen until four years after the journey to Switzerland, when the picture called "The Goddess of Discord in the Garden of the Hesperides" was exhibited in the British Institution.

In this same year Turner started his "Liber Studiorum" to which reference has already been made. He was engaged upon it in all for thirteen years, and had more than a few squabbles with the etchers and engravers employed to reproduce the drawings for which he used sepia, bistre, and burnt umber. It cannot be said that the venture was successful at first. The people who buy pictures or engravings were not quite ready for the "Liber Studiorum," and some time seems to have passed before the work became a financial success. The plates came

Hastings

Here we have one of Turner's "Golden Visions," a dream of harmony in blue, and orange, and gold, the capture of one of the elusive moments that only a painter of genius may hope to seize and to immortalise. It is another of the works that were painted before their time, and condemned in consequence to a long period of seclusion in the cellars of the Academy before men's eyes had been opened and they could stand before it with the capacity to recognise what the artist had seen.

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out in parts of five each. At first the proofs cost 25s. and the plates 15s. Later on the prices were raised to two guineas and one respectively. Turner kept the unsold impressions and hoarded them in his house in Queen Anne Street where they were discovered after his death. During the painter's lifetime a complete set of the "Liber Studiorum" changed hands for £3, while in 1873 a set no better fetched nearly £900 at Christies, and the copies that Turner himself had preserved were sold for over £17,000. Mr Wells, President of the old Water Colour Society, was said by his daughter to have been responsible for the inception of this work, but the point is one which admits of considerable doubt as far as the initial motive is concerned. It is needless to tell how the value of the proofs and the plates has increased of late years. The first publication of this series belongs to 1807,

His Life.

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the work upon it started in the previous year.

Turner was appointed professor of perspective at the Royal Academy in 1808, about the time when his friendship with Lord Egremont of Petworth began. It was a very pleasant association for both. The men understood each other, and did not get in each other's way, so that Turner felt quite at home at Petworth which he enriched with some very beautiful pictures. It is about this period in his career that the brilliant colour begins to appear on Turner's canvas. He is still far removed from the Turner of the full middle or latter day period, but the early blues and the browns are beginning to admit rivals. "Apollo and the Python" of 1811 may be said to mark the coming of colour, and one year later came a tour in Devonshire that had, or seems to have had, a marked effect upon the

artist's wakening colour sense. Here, as in the first Continental journey, the fruits of vision were slow in making their appearance. We have to turn to 1815 to find "Crossing the Brook," the picture now in the National Gallery. It is a landscape study, looking towards Plymouth and Mount Edgcumbe, with a view of the Tamar which separates Devonshire from Cornwall. In the water colour room at the National Gallery is one of the many sketches he made for this picture. "Crossing the Brook" has no high lights, but the dingier ones tend to disappear. It was not given to this country to waken the full glory of the painter's colour sense. Italy was to do that, and in a very few years too, for the Italian journey which may be said to have brought about the definite change from the first to the middle period was taken in 1819. Between the times of the Devonshire visit

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His Life.

and the Continental tour Turner occupied himself very fully and gave such leisure as he could afford to Twickenham and rural sights and scenes. It would seem to have been a happy season. The great journey to Rome and Southern Italy took place in 1819, and one of the finest results of this was the highly poetic "Bay of Baiæ" praised so highly and so beautifully by Ruskin, and treated so scurvily by the London air. Of course there are many other pictures in which the influence of this journey is clearly marked. And it may be that in and round the Bay of Naples Turner felt for the first time the full possibilities of sunshine. Certainly he never looked back. The earlier blues had gone, and the later browns began to depart rapidly, and Turner began to look towards the rainbow for his palette.

In 1824 the National Gallery was founded. Turner's devotion to British art, and in a

certain sense to British artists, doubtless turned his thoughts in the direction of the bequest that has added so much to the value of our National Collection. In 1826 came the curious incident resulting from Turner's picture "Cologne" being hung between two Lawrence portraits, where naturally the brilliant colouring hit the portraits hard, and to save the feeling of Sir Thomas, Turner put lamp-black on his sky. 1829 saw the exhibition of one of his most famous works, "Ulysses deriding Polyphemus," and in 1830 the painter suffered a heavy loss by the death of his father. To the following year belong the "Stranded Vessel off Yarmouth making Signals of Distress," and "Caligula's Palace and Bridge." Two years later the famous Venetian water colours were started, the series taking twelve years to complete, and its termination marking the decline of the painter's powers. In the

His Life.

following year (1834) he went on a Scottish tour with Lockhart, Walter Scott's biographer, to choose the sites for illustrating the Waverley Novels. Then followed the French tour, that resulted in the illustrations, showing us the rivers of France. "Mercury and Argus" was painted in 1836. "Apollo and Daphne" followed, and in 1839 the painter's art reached what was probably its highest achievement with the famous "Fighting Téméraire." Following years saw him in Switzerland, and are lighted for us by the afterglow of a supreme talent, but when that fades the end is not far away. After 1845 art seems to lose sight of Turner, now in his seventy-first year. He avoids the company of his fellows, hides away under an assumed name, and is seldom seen. His work is over. He may have his golden visions still, but he does not set them down. It is more by chance that one of the friends

of the earlier days finds him in his retreat where he lingers until 1851 to die a Sun worshipper to the last. We might wish him a more conventional end, but it was of his own deliberate choosing, and he had but to please himself. To us he is a name associated with the finest landscape and seascape painting that this country has yet produced. *His Life.*

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